

Aging Division

Wyoming Department of Health

Information and Education Bulletin

Subject: Prayer before Meals at a Federally Funded Senior Center

Recently, there was an inquiry to the Governor's Office stemming from a complaint about organized prayer before meals in a Federally Funded Senior Center. The Governor's Office referred the request to the Wyoming Department of Health and the Wyoming Attorney General's Office for research and response. As the response given will affect all Wyoming Senior Centers receiving Federal Funding, I wanted to share portions of the response, while respecting the anonymity of the person making the inquiry and the Senior Center. I will copy excerpts of the findings and final letter to the constituent here. Please use this information as a guideline until a formal policy can be determined and established.

BEGIN LETTER EXCERPT

Direction regarding prayer and federally funded programs is found in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR). The CFR is the codification of the general and permanent rules published in the Federal Register by the executive departments and agencies of the Federal Government. It is divided into 50 titles that represent broad areas subject to Federal regulation.

In regards to activities funded by the Department of Health and Human Services, which includes Administration on Aging funding, the CFR states:

(c) Organizations that receive direct financial assistance from the Department may not engage in **inherently religious activities**, such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization, as part of the programs or services funded with direct financial assistance from the Department. If an organization conducts such activities, the activities must be offered separately, in time or location, from the programs or services funded with direct financial assistance from the Department, and participation must be voluntary for beneficiaries of the programs or services funded with such assistance. 45 C.F.R. § 87.2.

(e) An organization that participates in programs funded by direct financial assistance from the Department shall not, in providing services, discriminate against a program beneficiary or prospective program beneficiary on the basis of religion or religious belief. 45 C.F.R. § 87.2.

Based upon this directive, the next question would be: "Is prayer an inherently religious activity?" For this question, we researched the definition of prayer. As defined by Princeton University (<http://wordnet.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=prayer>), prayer is the act of communicating with a deity, especially as a petition or in adoration or contrition or thanksgiving. Based upon that definition, one could determine that prayer is an inherently religious activity.

We could find no instance where a senior center lost funding for participating in an organized and formal prayer, however, given our research and the direction in the CFR, it is advised that the Senior Center not restrict personal prayer in any manner (e.g. a participant praying silently or audibly at a congregate meal site if the program participant so chooses), but refrain from an organized/led prayer.

END OF EXCERPT

I hope this answers any questions that a Senior Center might have regarding this issue.

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